

PATHWAYS TO THE PhD IN NURSING: AN ANALYSIS OF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES



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New educational pathways are needed to increase the number of doctor of philosophy (PhD)-prepared nurses. To address this need, an early-entry PhD option designed to engage students in PhD coursework and research during the undergraduate nursing major was developed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. An evaluation comparing the early-entry option with two more conventional entry points was conducted. Three groups ($N = 84$) comprised the sample: (a) early-entry students admitted as undergraduates or immediately upon graduation ($N = 29$), (b) mid-entry students with baccalaureate degrees and at least 1 year of work experience ($N = 27$), and (c) delayed-entry students with master's degrees and 1 or more years of work experience ($N = 28$). Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from the 3 groups of students who were admitted from 2002 to 2011. The sources of data were transcriptions of individual interviews and reviews of existing data. Seventy-seven percent of the sample participated in the individual interviews. The database review included all students who matriculated into the PhD program. Common themes among the 3 groups included a need for educational funding, the importance of a faculty mentor, and concern about preparation for the teaching role and the academic work environment. The groups were also comparable in terms of research productivity during doctoral study and postgraduation employment. Differences were found on measures of diversity, program progression, and perceptions of clinical competence. The findings provide needed data for the development and expansion of educational pathways to the PhD in nursing. (Index words; PhD nursing education; Early-entry PhD nursing programs; Doctoral education; Mentoring) *J Prof Nurs* 32:163–172, 2016. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

THE UNITED STATES is facing a nursing faculty shortage (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2012a). A major contributing factor to the shortage is the lack of doctor of philosophy (PhD)-prepared nurses. Over the past 5 years, the number of graduates with research-intensive degrees has remained relatively flat despite significant increases in the number and enrollment of students in nursing PhD programs (AACN, 2013; Fang,

Li, & Bednash, 2013). Further complicating the problem is the fact that graduates from nursing PhD programs have relatively little time in which to make significant contributions to the field. The average age of PhD-prepared nursing graduates is 46 (AACN, 2010a), over a decade older than the mean age of all doctoral graduates (Bell, 2009). In addition to their older age, the diversity of nursing faculty is also of concern. Although people from minority backgrounds constitute 37% of the general population, it has been estimated that only 12% of nursing school faculty are from underrepresented populations (AACN, 2014). These facts have led leaders in nursing to explore how future needs for faculty in research-intensive academic institutions can be met.

Review of Literature

The AACN Task Force on Research-Focused Doctorate Education in Nursing recommended that strategies be developed to attract students to PhD study earlier in nurses' education and careers (AACN, 2010b). Three strategies

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that address this recommendation are baccalaureate-to-PhD programs in nursing (AACN, 2012b; Bond, 2009; Ellenbecker & Kazmi, 2014; Squires, Kovner, Faridaben, & Chyun, 2014; Williams, 2007), accelerated postmaster's PhD programs (Fontaine & Dracup, 2006; Scherzer, Stotts, & Fontaine, 2010), and the prebaccalaureate-to-PhD option (Nehls & Barber, 2012; Nehls & Rice, 2014).

Baccalaureate-to-PhD programs admit students to doctoral education after completion of the baccalaureate degree. The programs are often referred to as "fast-track" programs because students typically begin PhD study at an earlier age and do not stop out to earn a master's degree or gain clinical work experience. Over 70 baccalaureate-to-PhD programs are in existence with more reported to be in the development stage (AACN, 2012a, 2012b).

There are descriptive reports (Bond, 2009; Williams, 2007) that provide useful information about the opportunities and challenges of postbaccalaureate-to-PhD programs. Williams (2007) offered guidance to underrepresented students about decision making and preparation for admission. Bond (2009) explored the academic and socialization challenges of baccalaureate-to-PhD programs by conducting focus groups of baccalaureate and master's to PhD students. She found that students initially expressed concern about being in classes together, that the baccalaureate students felt overwhelmed, and that master's students burdened with being in a supportive role. Two recent studies (Ellenbecker & Kazmi, 2014; Squires et al., 2014) shed more light on the current state of baccalaureate-to-PhD programs. To better understand how current programs are implemented and performing, Ellenbecker & Kazmi (2014) randomly invited half of the baccalaureate-to-PhD programs in the country to participate in a telephone survey. The results revealed considerable variability among programs in terms of credit hours, delivery method, full- or part-time attendance, financial support, and awarding of a master's degree. The authors also noted that there were common themes. All of the programs had small numbers of enrollees, were experimenting with innovative curricula, and remained hopeful about the future of baccalaureate-to-PhD programs. Another study (Squires et al., 2014) queried existing programs about admission criteria and surveyed students from New York University about their intent to enroll in a fast-track baccalaureate-to-PhD program. The authors (Squires et al., 2014) found that there were differences in admission criteria in regard to admission grade point average, graduate record examination, and requirements for clinical experience. The results of a 10-item questionnaire showed that the majority (67%) of the 606 students had never heard of a postbaccalaureate; however, 69% indicated that they might or definitely would consider it. The most common reasons for not matriculating directly into a PhD program were time, cost, and a desire to gain clinical experience (Squires et al., 2014). This view, that PhD graduates should have clinical experience, was the thesis of an editorial calling baccalaureate-to-PhD

programs a "bad idea" (Mason, 2003, p. 7). Countering this opinion was Olshansky (2004, p.2).

Another pathway that is intended to fast-track students to completion of the PhD is the accelerated option. The accelerated program enrolls students after completion of the master's degree into curricula designed to be completed in less time than traditional PhD programs. Although this strategy has been discussed among nurse leaders, data appear to be available from only one accelerated option at a major west coast school of nursing (Fontaine & Dracup, 2006; Scherzer et al., 2010). Selected students at this university received generous stipends and were expected to earn a PhD in 3 years, forgo working full time while enrolled and, upon graduation, assume a faculty position for 3 years. A review of the first two cohorts of 22 students showed that most of the students met the goal of graduating in 3 years and, upon graduation, nearly all (96%) accepted faculty positions.

To date, there is no evidence that the baccalaureate-to-PhD option or the postmaster's accelerated option has had an impact on the age or diversity of PhD-prepared nurses. Literature on the baccalaureate-to-PhD option (Bond, 2009; Ellenbecker & Kazmi, 2014; Williams, 2007) does not address the age or diversity of students. Publications about the accelerated postmaster's PhD option (Fontaine & Dracup, 2006; Scherzer et al., 2010) reported that the mean age of students at matriculation was 45 years of age.

A third strategy designed to address the need to attract younger students to PhD study is an early entrance to PhD education in nursing. Early-entry options admit students before or during their undergraduate program. This strategy, unlike the baccalaureate-to-PhD and postmaster's accelerated options, directly confronts the relatively older age of PhD graduates in nursing compared with other disciplines.

To our knowledge, there are four prebaccalaureate-to-PhD programs in the United States: University of Pennsylvania, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Only the program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has been described in the literature (Nehls & Barber, 2012; Nehls & Rice, 2014). Key components of that program are early and continuous research training with established nurse faculty mentor; individually tailored curricula taking into consideration students' backgrounds, interests, and goals; and the substitution of graduate level courses for undergraduate courses, where appropriate (Nehls & Barber, 2012).

A comprehensive evaluation of the early-entry PhD option at the University of Wisconsin-Madison was recently completed with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Evaluating Innovations in Nursing Education Initiative. The purpose of the evaluation was to compare the early entrance to PhD education in nursing with two more conventional entry points. This article examines qualitative and quantitative data with the goal of identifying the similarities and differences between early-entry students and students who begin PhD study later in their education or career. The findings provide data to guide the development of new early-entry programs and to revise existing PhD programs in nursing.

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